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ABSTRACT

Six suggestions are offered to help adult basic education teachers to develop adults' critical thinking skills. The suggestions recommend that teachers (1) seek reasons for an answer, (2) look for alternative answers, (3) take a passive role in discussion, (4) do not give an opinion unless asked, (5) ask students to back up their opinions, and (6) ask the student for examples. (YLB)

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TECHNíQUES

October 1983

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# PROMOTING CRITICAL THINKING: SIX SUGGESTIONS FOR ABE TEACHERS

During the winter semester of 1983 I had the opportunity to watch Louis W. Potts (Associate Professor of History) teach a freshman-level American History course. I observed a skillful teacher transform a course which is often boring and repetitive into a course which was interesting and new. He accomplished this change by helping the learners improve their critical thinking skills. As a result, many students were able to understand American history from a totally new perspective. Professor Potts believes that one goal of most general educational programs should be to help learners improve their critical thinking skills. I believe Adult Basic Education should be no exception.

Critical thinking is not an easy concept to understand, teach, or learn. Harvey Siegel describes critical thinkers as those people who seek reasons as the basis of their assignment, evaluations, and judgments. (The Educational Forum, November, 1980). Probably no single teacher in any one course can significantly improve a learner's critical thinking skills. However, many teachers working together, over a period of time, can help most students to become more skillful in their critical thinking. What follows are six suggestions which have been adopted from Professor Potts for ABE teachers. I realize this is not a complete list. I also realize you may already be doing some things to promote critical thinking. But if developing adults' critical thinking skills is one of your objectives, you may find these suggestions helpful in increasing your present repertoire of techniques and reinforcing what you are now doing.

*Suggestions*

1. *Seek Reasons For An Answer*

When learners give an answer, ask them how they got that answer. Have them explain their answers. You may find learners giving correct answers for incorrect reasons. Here you are looking at internal logics. To improve critical thinking the teacher must be as concerned with the reasoning behind the answer as the answer itself. You can use this technique on a one-to-one basis or in a group discussion. If your program is individualized, consider using this as a change of pace. You can conduct this type of discussion in 15 minutes, and I think you will find the adults enjoy the give and take.

2. *Look For Alternative Answers*

Many times there is more than one answer to a question. Here again, discussing alternative answers if interesting for adults and works well in a class setting. Help the adult look at an issue from several points of view. Examining alternative points of view helps learners modify egocentric thinking patterns. World problems are often used by teachers for this purpose, but don't forget local issues such as land fills and election issues.

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3. *Take A Passive Role in Discussion*

When you get a discussion started, give the learners time and room to think. Teachers are authority figures and tend to control discussions rather than guiding discussions by helping students stay on the topic and clarifying points they are making. Discussion takes time. Be patient.

4. *Don't Give Your Opinion Unless Asked*

When teachers give their opinion, discussion and thinking often stops. Give the learners a chance to draw their own conclusions. When asked, give your opinion and follow that with the reasoning behind your position. If you happen to modify your opinion because of something said, be sure and tell the class. Changing positions in light of new facts is an important skill in critical thinki' . Model that behavior.

5. *Ask Students to Back up Their Opinions*

When students take a position on a controversial issue such as drug use, ask them if they know any facts which might support their position. Don't respond with, "Can you prove that?," but rather respond in a way which will continue the thought process. If no facts are offered, you may respond by asking what facts might be needed to support the opposite position.

6. *Ask the Student for Examples*

When a student is trying to explain a concept, ask that person to give an example so the rest of the class might have a clearer idea of the point being made. For instance, if a student has given a definition of "freedom," you might ask for an example of freedom followed by asking the student for an example of what freedom is not. Or, a teacher can give an example which intentionally misses the point *slightly* and let the student clarify the teacher's understanding.

*Summary*

If one of your main goals is to promote critical thinking, you must encourage the learner to question, question, and question. Integrating the above suggestions into your regular classroom or learning center routine will facilitate the critical thinking process.

—Donald W. Mocker

*Further Study*

To further understand classroom techniques, read: Shore, Ira. *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*. Boston: South End Press, 1980.